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STATEMENT BY SECRETARY McKAY ON OIL AND GAS LEASING ON WILDLIFE REFUGES

Secretary of the Interior Douglas McKay today issued the following statement:

"I am amazed at the unfounded charges which have been made by the Wildlife Management Institute concerning regulations dealing with oil and gas leases on national wildlife refuges.

"The purposes of the charges by Dr. Ira N. Gabrielson directed at me and the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service are transparent. It is unfortunate that individuals having a reputation as conservationists are using their positions for the furtherance of political rather than conservation aims.

"It is also disappointing to see a responsible conservation organization resort to the reckless use of the thoroughly discredited 'give away' charge to gain publicity in organs of known political opposition to virtually everything this Department attempts to do in carrying out its responsibilities to the American public.

"The Institute must know that more than two years ago the Department issued a stop order which halted all leasing on national wildlife refuges because I felt that the regulations promulgated by the previous administration did not provide the refuges with adequate protection. It would be interesting to know if the Institute objected with equal vigor to these previous regulations, which were admittedly lax.

"The Institute must also know that before issuance of the new and greatly strengthened regulations the Department made a thorough study of all the problems relative to leasing on such areas. A number of conferences were held with specialists on the matter, including representatives of major national conservation organizations, and the amended regulations took into account the suggestions which were thus provided.

"The new regulations specifically provide that areas indispensable for the protection and preservation of rare and endangered species, remnant big-game herds and irreplaceable examples of unique plants for animal ecology--such as the Aransas whooping crane wintering area and the Red Rock lakes, homes of the Trumpeter swann--are not available for leasing at any time or under any conditions.

"The stringent provisions of the new regulations, which are carefully designed to assure maximum protection of wildlife refuges, should by this time be well-known to the Institute.

"Dr. Ira N. Gabrielson of the Institute was present at the two day session of the Secretary's Advisory Committee on Conservation on December 1 and 2 at which these regulations were gone over in great detail.

"Fish and Wildlife Service experts spent several hours explaining every aspect of the new regulations to the Advisory Committee members and it seems strange that Dr. Gabrielson did not avail himself of the opportunity at that time to register any protests the Institute might have.

"On the contrary, Dr. Gabrielson joined other members of the Committee in unanimously approving a resolution which stated: 'we believe that the proposed regulations will provide reasonable protection for wildlife refuges if vigorously administered.'

"It is even more amazing that the Institute in its recent statement revealed that it is greatly misinformed concerning the regulations. The statement is made, for example, that oil operators can now get an immediate lease with no prior submittal of any operating plan.

"This statement would seem to indicate a notable lack of understanding of the regulations.

"Under the regulations, 12 of the refuge areas are inviolate and no oil and gas development can take place.

"On at least half of the refuges no leases will be issued unless a complete and detailed operating plan for the area, which will insure full protection for the particular values for which the refuge is established, is approved by the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"On the remaining refuges stringent requirements must still be met under the terms of the lease.

"No prospecting or drilling operations may be conducted on lands administered for wildlife conservation without the consent and approval of the Fish and Wildlife Service as to the time, place, and nature of such operations.

"In every instance a plan of development which includes lands administered for wildlife conservation shall not be approved without the concurrence of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"At the time the regulations were issued and on several occasions since then, many of the country's leading wildlife conservationists have expressed themselves as pleased with the regulations. They have made it clear that they consider the new regulations as insuring protection for refuge areas which was not heretofore adequately provided.

"In their comments, the conservationists also took particular note that the administration of the regulations is entirely within the province of the Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service and that no development can proceed without his approval."

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